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Putting people first! Exploring how to improve public participation in planning: Case studies from Latvia and Estonia

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Abstract

Landscape planning requires the incorporation of stakeholders into the process, but how this is done and how to engage stakeholders in a meaningful way needs careful consideration. Several questions need to be asked: who is engaged, at what stage and how? Despite the message over several years that meetings do not work, there is still a reliance on meetings to inform stakeholders, which rarely engages the people most affected by the plans. When stakeholders do not attend it is often assumed that people do not care about their environment. Understanding stakeholders' decision-making - both the rational and irrational processes - will help planners to engage better with communities. Additionally, using artists and storytellers to help to articulate people's desires and thoughts regarding their environment has the potential to open communication channels between stakeholders and planners leading to greater legitimacy and relevance of landscape planning.

Key words: Public participation in planning, Decision-making, Facilitation and dialogue, Understanding community dynamics

Introduction

Landscapes are a product of the interactions of people who live, work or visit an area on the elements that comprise that landscape (Council of Europe 2000) Even the natural environments, which are perceived to be pristine are impacted by people to some degree (Buller 2004). Invariably, therefore, any planning process will have an influence on people as stakeholders in that process and as such they need to be included in a meaningful way.

How stakeholders are included and at what stage, are crucial questions. How ordinary people, without the knowledge of planning, are incorporated practically into the sometimes lengthy, process requires careful thought and creativity, in order to prevent process fatigue or lack legitimacy (Fox & Murphy 2012). Teaching in landscape planning has to go beyond the nuts and bolts of the planning process and re-imagine putting people at the heart of the process. Building scenarios for people to choose from or factoring in frequent consultation meetings with inhabitants is not enough and may represent "Tokenism" on Arnstein's ladder of citizen participation (Arnstein 1969).

This paper presents some results and reflections arising from a recent study of sense of place in rural Latvia and Estonia. It started from the premise that despite the fact that people care deeply about their landscapes, they are unwilling to spend their time attending meetings. Meetings were described as "a headache" and often it was felt that meetings served no purpose, as people felt the decisions had already been made. The traditional meeting format does not facilitate stakeholder engagement and therefore there needs to be a focus on finding innovative ways to walk people through the process.

Study approach and method

Rural municipalities in Latvia and Estonia were selected for study on Sense of Place and a series of interviews were held in each in order to uncover their attitudes to involvement in local

landscape planning decisions. In addition workshops were held with a Latvian NGO, Ūdenzīmes to explore paths for development relevant to their community.

Results and discussion

Enabling and supporting stakeholders to generate their own plans and allowing them to be intimately involved in the process is both challenging but necessary to produce plans that practically serves the communities. An example comes from Ūdenzīmes, who recognised that physical dereliction at the heart of a community was reinforcing the sense of isolation of inhabitants. They worked with the inhabitants to campaign to have an abandoned and decaying Soviet-era dairy removed from the centre of the village of Kaldabruna. This action signalled to the inhabitants that change was possible through their own efforts – a turning point. Self-esteem rose and there has been an on-going process of transformation of the locality, through artistic input in terms of creative ideas and workshops. Recently, material from abandoned buildings have been remade into beautiful objects to support the local economy – a useful allegory for inhabitants to demonstrate that even objects perceived as useless can be renewed and made useful again.

Encouraging the use of the creative arts to articulate plans and the various stages of planning aids communication. One of the workshops conducted by one of the authors demonstrated the synergies that could arise by bringing artists together with inhabitants of small villages in Latvia. Workshop attendees were encouraged to tell their stories with the assistance of the artists. This was interpreted in different ways, but it opened up possibilities relevant to the local area. A local legend of a dried up river led to the concept of a festival along the “*ūdēns ceļš*” (river road) incorporating local produce into the theme. An artist together with a farmer reconceptualised promoting the farm by displaying the farm animal pictures on an oak tree – a significant tree in Latvian culture. Excitement was generated through these synergies that novel ideas were possible even in small communities (Figure. 1). The pictures created by the artists are a visual reminder to the community of the ideas they created and the plans to bring these ideas to fruition can be tracked through visual representations.



*Figure 1. Artists and rural inhabitants working on depicting their story.
(Photo: Joanna Storie)*

There is also a need to understand behaviour and decision-making in communities, both the rational and irrational aspects (Lertzman 2015). As Lertzman (2015:41) argues “research methodologies need to ‘get underneath’ and uncover the often contradictory, inconsistent, irrational, affective and complicated ways in which people engage with our most pressing environmental challenges.” This, she argues, aids better engagement design with the communities and structure the communication with “relevant insight.” This requires taking note of psychosocial techniques for listening to the community, their fears and their hopes, as well as their practical suggestions. The recent rage across the EU demonstrates that communities do not feel listened to and this desperately needs addressing.

Prior to the dairy removal in Kaldabruna, work to improve the local economy could have been hampered by existing poor self-esteem and feelings of hopelessness. The capacity of the village inhabitants to participate in development planning has been improved through local business generation, creative workshops and an annual hay sculpture festival. These activities have built participatory and collaborative skills, the development of administrative skills through holding workshops and festivals and creative skills have been ignited. Over time the capacity to participate has been increased as people began to feel their voice was important to the direction of the NGO and they had something worthwhile to contribute.

Conclusions

Landscape planners need better skills and should embrace non-normative approaches in situations where public processes are poorly developed and social capital is weak, as in many places in Latvia and Estonia. Better teaching should enable future landscape planners to understand the community dynamics, such as networks and power structures that may aid or inhibit development. As the sense of place study highlighted, gatekeepers can affect the flow of communication in a village. Thus, identifying supportive gatekeepers within the community could be useful as entry points to facilitate communication or alert planners to possible opposition or potential for elite capture by those in power.

Teaching could benefit by incorporating these various elements of deep listening through the use of psychosocial techniques and communication development through collaboration with artists into curricula. Learning to listen and opening up communication channels through the use of creative exercises and enabling and supporting inhabitants to articulate and take their own steps in developing the plans that affect their landscapes, will assist future planners to engage better with the communities. As Lertzman suggests “Engagement is about creating contexts for creative, authentic participation”. Therefore, if we start with the supposition that stakeholders are concerned about the landscapes they live in, but the onus is on us as planners to enable people to develop the language and skills to articulate the changes they want, we will take greater care to seek out and involve the stakeholders along the path to creative change in landscapes or sustainable preservation if that is required.

By putting people first the language changes from “How do we overcome apathy or get people to come to meetings?” to “How do we draw out the care and concern for the landscape?” “How do we help local people to articulate their aspirations for the landscape?” Through listening to people, landscape planners will be in a unique position to be able to articulate people’s desires and needs with respect to their landscape in creative and innovative ways

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